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Tendencies in Modern American Poetry. By AMY LOWELL. The Macmillan Company, 1917.

The new movement in modern American poetry, according to Miss Amy Lowell, consists of three stages. The first is represented by Mr. Edwin Arlington Robinson and Mr. Robert Frost, whose work is realistic, direct, and simple; the second by Mr. Edgar Lee Masters and Mr. Carl Sandburg, whose poetry is "the most revolutionary that America has produced"; the third by the Imagists, "H. D." and Mr. John Gould Fletcher, who "may properly be said to be entering upon the last stage of this 'movement,' and whose work may very well be called evolutionary." Very appropriately Miss Lowell gives special consideration to the Imagists and their creed, not merely because she herself is of them, but because they constitute to her mind the most striking development of modern poetry. And yet when the creed is examined in its six articles, we find, as she confesses, nothing new but principles "fallen into desuetude." Is it possible to gather from them a clear conception of what is meant by Imagist poetry?

The first article of this creed is: "To use the language of common speech, but to employ always the *exact* word, not the nearly-exact, nor the merely decorative word." Hence away with all inversions, *clichés*, et hoc genus omne of ordinary poetry. "Battlemented clouds" join the deus ex machina and waxen-figure spooks in the limbo of worn-out conventions. But haven't all the college Rhetorics from Hill to Linn told us the same thing as a requirement of all good prose and verse? The second article is: "To create new rhythms—as the expression of new moods—and not to copy old rhythms which merely echo old moods." And every original poet does likewise, as Shakespeare and Milton with their blank verse and Tennyson with his quatrain. Of course, the special creation in rhythm today is free verse, of which later. The third tenet is: "To allow absolute freedom in the choice of subject." The poets have always resisted the critics in this respect, and the world has supported the poets when they treat their subject poetically. It is not the subject so much as the imaginative mind that counts. Article four: "To present an image (hence the name 'Imagist') . . . Poetry should render particulars exactly and not deal in vague generalities, however magnificent and sonorous."

This should surely give the key to the Imagist creed, but does it do so? Imagism is "a clear presentation [not representation] of whatever the poet wishes to convey," whether it be something sensuously or emotionally comprehended. But wherein is Imagism in this respect different from any poetry that seeks to visualize the concrete or make vivid an emotional experience? The fifth article is: "To produce poetry that is hard and clear, never blurred and indefinite," which is virtually included in articles one and four, and is just as true of legitimate as of Imagist poetry. The last rule is that "concentration is of the very essence of poetry,"—a rule Mr. Fletcher violates as frequently as the youthful Keats, and "H. D." not more rigorously obeys than Browning.

Now Miss Lowell contends that there is something so characteristic in the Imagist poetry that it should be distinguished at once from the work of the first-stagers in the new movement, Mr. Robinson and Mr. Frost, and Professor Erskine should not have made the colossal blunder of calling these two poets Imagists. But Miss Lowell admits that the analysis of rules and tenets and all such mechanical labor will not give us the touchstone to this style. One must feel it, like the grand style of which Arnold speaks. But just as one can distinguish by purely mechanical means Milton's blank verse from Shakespeare's and Keats's heroic couplet from Chaucer's or Pope's, surely one should be able to indicate by far better guides than the dangerous feelings the distinction between Imagist and all other poetry. One is inclined to suspect that the difference is rather one of degree than of kind, of eccentricity than of new creation. Thus "H. D.'s" *Oread*—

Whirl up, sea—
Whirl your pointed pines,
Splash your great pines
On our rocks,
Hurl your green over us,
Cover us with your pools of fir.—

is imagism because it is not anything else, for only an Imagist would whirl pines, splash great pines, and when it was all over, cover us with pools of fir (the spelling is correct). So also we discover a great fondness for cyclamen with its stiff ivory and bright fire petals, stagnant ash barrels, egg-white mist, pale and languid terraces, lacquered mandarin moments, etc. It is not so

much the exact as the esoteric word that is chosen. A dictionary is of little value.

One is disposed to emphasize the second article in the creed as the most important and to regard free verse as the distinctive mark of this poetry, though the Imagists deny that it is so. Miss Lowell includes an exposition of this metrical form with the conclusion that it "has no absolute rules, it would not be 'free' if it had." So far as I know it is therefore the only free thing in the universe. According to the Imagists the unit of this verse is the strophe and each strophe is a complete circle; and within this charmed circle one may apparently do what one pleases. Moreover, the circle is not limited in size, nor "need the times allowed to negotiate it be always the same. There is room here for an infinite number of variations." And Miss Lowell illustrates from the *Oread* quoted above. This poem or strophe or circle is made up of five cadences, corresponding to the lines, which again are made up of time units in no sense syllabic. There are two such units in the first, second, and fourth lines, and three in the third and fifth. And so on, "Till we exclaim—' But where's music, the dickens? '" And we are no nearer comprehending the rhythm of this verse than we were to understanding the actual significance of imagism from the other tenets of the creed. Is it only for the elect to know it?

In her treatment of the six poets who make up her volume Miss Lowell is singularly uneven. The short biographical sketches are appreciative and illuminating. She is particularly felicitous in her comparative estimates of the several poets, and very aptly puts each in his proper niche. Her enthusiasm, however, is inclined every now and then to run away with her judgment. And in matters of detail she makes statements that will not stand the mildest acid test. She seems to have a strange notion of the academic or classicist conception of metrics. Thus she instances Mr. Frost's somewhat ambiguous line,

Mary sat musing on the lamp-flame at the table

as shocking the elder taste with its accent on the last syllable of 'Mary' and on 'on' and 'at.' Did Miss Lowell ever hear of trochaic inversion? Or has she never read such lines as these of Shelley:

And splinter and knead down my children's bones,
All I bring forth, to one void mass battering and blending

which are as romantic as Frost's,

I crossed the river and swung round the mountain.

Excellent as much of Mr. Frost's work is, is it not superlative praise to rank it with Burns's or Synge's? And what shall we say of such a pronouncement as this, that Mr. Robinson's poetry is "'cribbed, cabin'd and confined' [*sic*] to a remarkable degree, but it is undeniably, magnificently noble"—which last three words one might apply to Milton's verse but not to any of much less rank. In an interesting analysis of Mr. Robinson's *Isaac and Archibald*, Miss Lowell quotes the following:

They were old men,
And I may laugh at them because I knew them.

And then she adds this illuminating comment: "Does the poet really laugh? Assuredly not, laughter is the one emotion [*sic*] which he has not at command. Does it mean a sneer? Less still. The poet does not sneer. The life he sees about him is too solemn and too sad. The line is cryptic, because it really means just a question, pitying, fearful, cast into space to go knocking about among the stars." In the words of another poet,

And still they were the same bright, patient stars.

Or again about Mr. Robinson's *Richard Cory*, quoted entire and ending with the lines,

And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
Went home and put a bullet through his head.

Miss Lowell makes this statement: "In four words, 'one calm summer night,' is set a background for the tragedy which brings the bullet shot crashing across our ear drums with the shock of an earthquake." Accustomed as we are to the *Spoon River Anthology*, we know that bullet is due in the last lines; we are not so easily shocked.

Miss Lowell has labored valiantly and with undaunted enthusiasm to show that "there is a new spirit permeating the work of American poets," and in this she has undoubtedly succeeded. The revolutionary spirit in Mr. Masters and the socialistic in Mr. Sandburg are different from what has been; and the spirit of "H. D." and Mr. Fletcher is seen in their endeavour to rediscover and reveal beauty and truth in our modern world. I am not so sure as Miss Lowell is that these poets have really captured the spirit of humanity and of truth and of beauty so that it has become the living inspiration of great poetry.

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First Spanish Course. By E. C. HILLS and J. D. M. FORD. Boston, D. C. Heath & Co., 1917. vi + 330 pp.

Teachers in high schools have often complained that the *Spanish Grammar* of Messrs. Hills and Ford was too formal and literary for their immature students. They cannot possibly offer that objection to the *First Spanish Course*, which is not at all a revision of the *Grammar* but a distinctly new piece of work. It is a marked improvement over the first book, from a pedagogical point of view, and is primarily intended for high-school classes. It is extremely unfortunate that the authors have not treated as fully as in the *Grammar* the introductory chapter on pronunciation, not so much for the sake of the pupils as for the teachers, most of whom are phonetically untrained, and whose knowledge of the pronunciation of Spanish is frequently incorrect. Furthermore, teachers are confronted with so many conflicting statements with regard to the pronunciation of Spanish that an exhaustive treatment of Castilian phonetics would be of great assistance to them.

One of the best features of the *First Spanish Course* is the Spanish exercises. Modern-language grammars too often lack the breath of life because the phrases in a given lesson do not follow one another in thought. They have no context; they do not train the student to think in the language which he is studying. The alternative exercises of the *Spanish Grammar* were an improvement pedagogically on the exercises in the grammar proper. The phrases